

FIERCE TRAMPS OF SIBERIA

LIFE AMONG THE MURDEROUS "BRADIAGI," OR, RUNAWAY CONVICTS ALONG THE GREAT ROADS OF ASIATIC RUSSIA—THESE WRETCHED, BRUTAL WANDELERS MAY BE SHOT DOWN LIKE BEASTS, AND ARE HUNTED FOR REWARDS BY THE MONGOL TARTARS—THEY ROB AND KILL TRAVELERS, LEVY ON THE PEASANTS FOR FOOD AND ARE WHOLLY WITHOUT FEELINGS OF COMPASSION OR CONSCIENCE.

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If I were asked what feature of Siberian life impressed me most, during my recent visit, I should have to designate the so-called Siberian tramps, or runaways. This decidedly unique system of brigandage, which has become an outgrowth of the Siberian exile system, was brought particularly to my notice while on my bicycle journey along the great post road from Achinsk to eastern Siberia. The interest aroused by several chance meetings with this curious class of fugitives prompted me to observe and inquire more particularly into their peculiar habits, and the facts thus acquired, left at the time, a very deep impression upon me.

Traveling without a penny may be attractive to some and may be profitable in a populated country, but tramping along the snowy wastes of Siberia, cold and hungry, and always in danger, can only be, to me, the outcome of dire necessity, the necessary choice between bad and worse.

The Siberian runaway convict from all appearances does not so much seek permanent liberty from his confinement as to obtain a momentary respite. And what a fearful freedom it is! A never-ending struggle in a murderous climate, with the tortures of hunger and a constant hiding from the police, and the final, and, alas, too often, the last, put into iron and sent back to the mines from which he has escaped. Such is the career of the Bradiagi.

I was informed by one of the Siberian prison officials that sometimes a whole life is thus spent in tramping, being caught, brought back and running away again, and so on until death overtakes the unfortunate and, from the burden of life and society from a dangerous pariah.

SHOT DOWN ON SIGHT.

To discourage these frequent attempts to run away the government has granted the lawful privilege to any one of either capturing or shooting down the Bradiagi on sight, and, in fact, the Mongol Tartars in the Irkutsk province make a regular business of hunting them just as they do the fur animals, according to their calculation, the clothes of these unfortunate wretches, however bad, are worth more than five kopecks (2½ cents), the price they obtain for the "American" squirrel. While crossing these Russian settlements the Bradiagi is afraid to reveal himself even for obtaining food and is invariably forced, through hunger, to commit theft.

When about to continue my bicycle journey through the particular infested district on my way to Irkutsk, I was warned by my apprehensive host to be particularly on my guard. "No," said he, "I am not afraid of you, but I am afraid of the Bradiagi. He is in the broad daylight and you are in sight of the Siberian capital itself."

"Their mode of attack is simple," he continued, in answer to my inquiry.

To open the door and showed signs of such uneasiness, that then for the first time flashed across me the words of my Krasnoyarsk host, "Keep a good look out about Touloung. They are worse there than anywhere."

A second knock, louder than the first, cut short my reflections and induced me to make signs to the postmaster that my revolver was loaded. Apparently reassured, he then went to the door, unlocked it and let in the mysterious visitor.

A tall, spare man, with reddish gray beard and mustache, pushed rudely past the postmaster and entered the room, and the divesting himself of a large bearskin pelisse, sank into a chair with a sigh of satisfaction. "At last," he muttered in Russian, and at the same time adding sharply, "I thought you were going to keep me out there all night. Why did you not open sooner. Come, quick! The same old story, the same old story. Don't stand there staring like a fool."

That the stranger had no legitimate right to order provisions in a government posthouse without a pordarozhna I was well aware. This fact, however, did not seem to occur to the postmaster, who sank away without a word of remonstrance to let the refreshments. In the meantime, being unobserved in the darkened apartment adjoining, I lay perfectly quiet in order to observe more closely this interesting visitor and his movements.

He had not a reassuring countenance. One thing especially aroused my suspicion, he had not removed his cap on entering the room and apparently had no intention of doing so. It is an unwritten law in Russia that on entering an apartment the head shall be uncovered, and the respect for the sacred ikon, which always hangs in one corner of the room, than out of any politeness to the occupants, I had never yet seen the rule departed from, and felt sure that the man had some hidden motive for remaining covered.

His dress was unique, if not becoming; a pair of gray, broad trousers, secured by a single button, a certain, secured by a broad red sash around the waist, and a pair of rough top-boots. Save for a thick wooden undergarment, which lay on the table beside him, the stranger was apparently unarmed. Who could the man be? And where, in Heaven's name, had he come from? This was a question which I did not ask, for I noticed with satisfaction that the day was beginning to dawn.

One circumstance which occurred as I put an end to my conjectures and convinced me that my first suspicions were well grounded. Having made a hearty meal of tea, black bread and milk, he pushed his chair back and resting both feet on the stove, lit a cigarette. While so doing his cap accidentally slipped off and I distinctly saw that one-half of his head was shaved, the distinguishing mark of the Siberian convict. That he was a katag, there was now no doubt. He left the posthouse very quietly without inquiring for his food, nor did the postmaster make any further remarks regarding his strange visitor. It might have got him into trouble with the authorities if he had.

MOSTLY FUGITIVES FROM JUSTICE.

What kind of people these tramps are can easily be imagined when it is known that the most dangerous criminals are exiled to the mines and men who are sent to settle in Siberia never have recourse to flight. These fugitives from justice, however, having passed Irkutsk, follow the chief post road, which is the only line of communication between eastern Siberia and European Russia, and forsake it only when they are overtaken by the police. There is nothing whatever but unhabited wastes. The Bradiagi must, perforce, follow this track, hiding in the bushes when they hear the sound of a horse. When traveling on the postroad, however, I sometimes came upon these human will-o'-the-wisps unawares and much to their astonishment. They were not at all shy, and in one occasion as I was riding briskly round a curve in the road I came in sight of one of them on the opposite side of the highway, which, as is usual in Siberia, was of enormous width. He was hurrying along with his gaze on the ground and did not notice me until I dismounted and called out to him. As he looked up and caught sight of me, he was enormously surprised, and I noticed that he was a Russian, which I could not help remarking. Whether it was the sight of my revolver, which I always wore outside on my belt, or the strange appearance of the man, I cannot tell, but he glanced around him quickly for a moment as though meditating a "bolt," then, realizing, perhaps, that he could not possibly escape, he raised his hands, he seemed to resign himself and came slowly toward me.

As he approached I saw that he was fairly trembling in every limb with fright, and his mouth was quivering.

To see such a picture of abject fear was positively painful. Although he was a great big hulking fellow, and had an ugly looking cudgel under his arm, he was as unnerve and cowed as a beaten dog, and evidently expected me to immediately handcuff him and take him back to prison. To make sure that he was really what I suspected, I ordered him to lift up his sheepskin coat, and to behold, underneath were his prison clothes, whilst hidden by his high pointed boots were the ends of his chains still attached to the anklets, which he had not yet had time to remove. His head also, as he showed me by removing his cap, had been half shaved in the usual convict manner. Whatever his crime had been, it was certainly no business of mine to rearrest him, so after having taken his photograph with the kodak and given him a few kopecks for holding the bicycle, I let him go. As he withdrew I asked him, out of curiosity, where he was going. To my astonishment he shouted back, "Moscow!" The idea of his starting out on foot to accomplish a journey of over 3,000 miles struck me as being decidedly Siberian. In this "land of distances," 1,000 miles count for nothing.

One of the leading characteristics of the Bradiagi, which distinguishes them from other murderers and freebooters, is their complete indifference and absence of irritation and passion when committing a deed of blood. But what astonishes one most is the combination of the most hardened crime with some religious ideas, and also of the severe discipline of hard labor of the mines, which produces a show of pity toward the victim they are destroying in the most cold-blooded manner.

THEY HOLD TO A STRANGE RELIGION.

Misfortune—and the Bradiagi is one of the most unfortunate of beings—unconsciously turns their thoughts toward religion. In justification of their crimes they invariably say, "We are poor sinners, and the great revolution, and therefore God will forgive us all our sins." Whenever they see a cross they always take off their caps and cross themselves. In conversation, I am told, they are very fond of quoting what at first sight seem Scripture texts, but what in reality are phrases made up by themselves for their own consolation. "God hates the rich ones of this world," "Sin committed in perfect humility is no sin," "If you must kill a man, don't kill his soul."

Besides these religious sayings they have a great many proverbs which clearly indicate their lawless nature, viz.:

"He is not a thief who steals, but he who allows himself to be caught."

"A fool gives a wise man takes."

"What you cannot get by yours; what you cannot to other people."

"To describe more graphically this class of men whose type is wholly unknown in Europe, I will relate the following incident which occurred in the village of Balachka, lived two settlers, sent there as punishment for some small offense. One was a Russian called Integru, the other a Pole. They were both shoemakers and entered into a partnership to concentrate their efforts in earning a small living. One day they made an excursion from the village, some 10 or 20 versts, with the intention of cutting small pieces of wood used by shoemakers in pegging books. Reaching a few straggling bushes they separated and each began to cut the small twigs they required. As Integru was about to cut a party of 12 men just then passed. Perceiving the Pole alone, they surrounded him in an instant. Integru, who was but a few paces off, hid in the bushes and witnessed what followed. He could not help his heart, he knew that the Pole showed himself he would be killed at once. Trembling with fear he was compelled to remain an unwilling witness of the tragedy.

"Hail friends," said the tramps, taking off their caps. "Bad luck to you that you have met us, but you see it is not our fault. Such is the will of God. How much money do you carry?"

"Five roubles, which I will give you as well as my clothes, if you will only spare my life."

"Your life is of no use to us, and we would really like to let you go, but you see, dear friend, we have our laws, which we cannot avoid. If you were to escape alive you might report us to the police, and very deep trouble would therefore follow us poor sinners—but die you must."

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